

The Way of Faith

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The inextricable relationship between Buddhist meditation and faith is not always clearly understood. To many people, faith is a dirty word, a blind belief in some unprovable and unknowable doctrine. Our culture is permeated with the outlook of empirical science that requires that one have hard, provable evidence to support anything before it is accepted as true. Faith, however, does not argue with the empirical mind which wants to hold truth in the same way as one holds an object in one's hand. Faith transcends this mind, and stands on the inner truth which lies at the core of all of us, the knowledge and call of our own Buddha Nature. The Eternal is as real as the ground we stand on, but we gain certainty and knowledge of it only to the extent that we put the teaching into practice and spiritually train. No one else's certainty can become our own possession. If we train in faith, certainly arises naturally.

Meditation is sometimes misunderstood as being only a technique for concentrating and quieting the mind, which in turn helps one to deal better with the world. Yet such a technique or mental exercise will not solve the larger problems of life such as the meaning of birth and death. No "technique" can give the strength and determination to sit still and embrace the overwhelming fears and sorrows that life may bring. Similarly, the view that all one's problems will "work themselves out" is untenable, for the world surrounds us with people who are overwhelmed by their suffering. True meditation requires the faith that within each of us there is an indestructible place which fulfills all our true need and that within the stillness of meditation and our efforts of training in daily life we are beckoning to and coming to know that place. Faith requires a naive mind that believes that no external peril or chaos can truly touch us, no internal fire of anxiety or despair can harm anything that truly matters.

Despair is the opposite of faith. In everyone's heart is a deep rooted spiritual longing, and all those who deny it are unknowingly living in despair. Yet despair takes other forms than just hard, outright

denial. Many hear the teaching, recognize its inherent truth and still turn away. This sometimes comes from the feeling that, although the aim of religious life is the worthiest goal, "It is not for me." I am different from the Buddha's and Saints." They see aspects of themselves or their lives as obstacles to training instead of the stuff of training. We all have our hidden and apparent flaws, history of mistakes and hurts, perhaps a memory of past vacillation and half-hearted efforts. Despair here is the voice that whispers, "They who have a real living spiritual life are different from me."

When I first began Buddhist training, faith was something mysterious to me. I thought it must be something which would support and comfort me when troubled, which would give me strength when my courage and will were failing. But where was it? I keenly felt its absence. My mistake was that I did not understand the close link between faith and the correct use of the will. Faith is not a passive state. Faith is to grasp the will and train wholeheartedly even in the midst of doubt and despair. It is through this effort that we turn The Wheel of the Law within ourselves, that our doubts are dispelled, and our hopes eventually fulfilled.

The seed of faith that brings each of us into Buddhism can be externally quite different. Some of us hear the call to train in the enlightened action of a teacher, others in the profundity of the Dharma, still others in their direct experience of the truth. The grounds of faith are not as important as our willingness to persevere no matter how much sorrow, despair, fear, or inadequacy plague us.

Faith itself is very simple: it is an underlying belief that there is a purpose in the unfolding of our lives, and that the solution to each twist and turn is to grasp our will, sit still, accept with gratitude and take refuge in the Three Treasures. Real faith is not demanding anything but trusting that whatever we need to know or do, "will arise naturally".

Do not bind the true nature of faith by thinking of it just as an emotion. The transient states of joy, gratitude, or peace are not the true refuge. All feelings belong to Annica, endlessly changing and

transforming themselves. The concept that emotional states of mind are permanent, unchanging entities is a common delusion and source of much suffering. People experience a great passionate love and become disappointed, bitter, empty when it passes away with time. Similarly, when the fruits of spiritual life are experienced and then disappear, it is easy to wonder if something has gone wrong. This doubt is intrinsic in despair, for despair is the feeling of hopelessness based on the belief that our present emotional state is our true identity and will not change. The faith that true spiritual life is based upon goes far deeper than any feeling, for it is founded in that still center within each of us in which dwells our Unborn Buddha Nature.

I have pointed out a distinction between faith and the emotions so that people will not mistakenly base their faith on a just a feeling which will change. Yet the feelings that accompany true religious life do reinforce one's faith. To long to be one with the Lord, to experience insight into the Buddha's path, and to feel gratitude, all these are invaluable aids in Buddhist training. They give us the strength to deal with many of the worldly desires and feelings which we need to face and convert. They help us move toward a deeper experience of faith, but they are not faith itself. When the feeling of gratitude fades, one must grasp one's will and still express the gratitude even though one's heart is now cold and the path may not be so clear.

True faith is all-acceptance: it is to take refuge in something deeper than the transient satisfactions of this world. To take refuge in the Lord allows one to see the unfolding of karma in its true state and original purity. When we fill our lives with external concerns, it means we lack faith and we are turning away from our hearts' deepest longing. It means we are seeking treasure by wandering away from the treasure house within ourselves.

The Hasidic Tradition has a beautiful story which illustrates this point: A King's son rebelled against his father and was banished from the sight of his father's face. After a time, the king was moved to pity for his son's fate and bade messengers go in search of him. It was long before one of the messengers found him - far from home. The

son was at a village inn, dancing barefoot and in a torn shirt in the midst of drunken peasants. The courtier bowed and said: "Your father has sent me to ask you what you desire. Whatever it may be, he is prepared to grant your wish." The prince began to weep. "Oh," said he, "if only I had warm clothing and a pair of stout shoes."¹

Faith is the key, for it is that which is necessary if we are to find that we are truly the son of a king. Otherwise we will spend our lives seeking the needs of the moment, and we will never gain our true inheritance.

The key to training is faith, yet there can be the delusion that one may inherently lack faith. All that is needed for faith is the effort of not doubting. Great master Dogen said, "One who would train in Buddhism must first believe completely therein and, in order to do so, one must believe that one has already found the Way, never having been lost, deluded, upside down, increasing or mistaken in the first place."² Do not allow your doubts to go unchecked and run your life. The Dharma and the Sangha are medicine for all your doubts.

Training can seem to be the most difficult task imaginable. It asks us to cast aside all the desires the self has fed through years of unenlightened action, and to go forth to that which it does not even know. It goes against all the normal pattern of living which seeks what is comfortable, easy and known. However, training is easy in that it finally puts us in alignment with the Heart's deepest desire. The effort of spiritual training can seem arduous, but avoiding training is much harder. When we live without faith, our only refuge is ourselves. We build walls of tension and fear around ourselves. Faith places the self in the hands of the Buddha, allowing the self to face its fear and opens our heart so we can embrace unfolding of our life and all of its endless change.

Great Master Tendo Nyojo said that we must train with the same energy we would employ if our hair were to catch fire. Yet many of us do not come to training with this deep feeling of urgency. When one sees deeply into the true nature of one's situation, however, the

truth itself will create the urgency. When we see the deep suffering that our misguided actions have caused, our desire to cleanse our karma is awakened. But do not put the cart before the horse. Faith is needed here, for very often, it is only by offering our efforts to train even though our hearts seem cold, can we awaken to the truth that allows our hearts to catch fire.

One calls and one answers. Never doubt your ability to answer, for each pure act of our spiritual life is an answer to the call and brings us one step closer to real peace and our true home.

Notes

¹Martin Buber, *Ten Rungs; Hasidic Sayings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), p. 28

²"Gakudo-Yojinshu: Important Aspects of Zazen," of the *Shobogenzo*, in *Zen is Eternal Life* by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett (Emeryville, CA: Dharma Publishing, 1976.), p.137.